

Watchwoman

Joanne Keaton

Finding her hands moving toward each other, Angela stifled the impulse to clap. She had just spotted a For Sale sign on the Stevenson's lawn. With a contented sigh, she continued her walk through the neighborhood, but she couldn't stop smiling.

In the next block, something puzzled her in a side yard. "Never noticed that before," she said softly. Her eyes darted about till she discovered the house number. Instantly she memorized it. Under such circumstances, she always wished she could carry a notebook and pen. That wouldn't do, of course.

Soon she passed a large L-shaped ranch and noted that only a shiny station wagon stood in the driveway. It worked, she thought, and nodded her head several times. How she had hated the old cars that the teenager used to work on in the drive.

She adjusted her floppy-brimmed hat and strode on. It was difficult to keep the hat in place on a windy day, but that never stopped her from wearing it. The years of protecting herself from the sun had paid off. Although she was sixty-one, she knew she had the face of a much younger woman. And she intended to stay looking better than her contemporaries.

At home she took out her file box. On a fresh card she wrote down the address she had memorized earlier and added the words, "large cement statue of lion under tree." I'll give them three weeks, she decided; after all, if it was a prank, it would take time to get someone to haul it away.

Flipping through the cards, she came to the one for the Stevensons. Trying to straighten out that family had been one of her toughest projects. Their house was especially important because it stood at the entrance to the subdivision. In nearly everything, the Stevensons had used such poor judgment. In March they still had a Christmas wreath on their door. For six months they had put off repairing their mailbox post after it had been hit by a car. The lawn was never mowed often enough, their shutters clashed with the color of the house and their trash overflowed the cans on garbage day. None of that mattered now for they were leaving. She would never know if her little anonymous notes had driven them away. Leaving the neighborhood was the only reasonable action for the Stevensons; they would never learn how to

live properly in Emerald Grove.

Now she had a note to write that was especially important to her. This morning she had found that cocker spaniel relieving itself again by her front hedge. The dog's owners should really be reported for breaking the leash law. Although they were undeserving of any consideration, she was going to give them the courtesy of a warning.

Anglea had an expensive electric typewriter, but for her helpful letters she always used her manual machine from the '50s; she couldn't risk having anything traced to her. She put a sheet of paper in the old Royal and typed: "I am extremely displeased to keep finding your dog's excrement in my yard. To avoid trouble, please keep your pet at home."

No, she couldn't send that—the message sounded too much like her. Though the word, excrement, made her cringe, it was the one she used in public if it became necessary to speak of such matters. Droppings was another word she thought of but soon decided wasn't quite right either.

Then she had it, something so appropriate for such crude people: "I'm sick and tired of your dog's shit on my lawn, and so are a lot of the neighbors. I don't have a gun, but I know someone with a lot of bushes who does."

The next day she put on her hat, pulled on her gloves and stepped out for another tour of the neighborhood. Richard, her husband, had always teased her about wearing gloves whenever she went outdoors. She had never minded for she had achieved the results she wanted: there was not a single brown age spot on her hands. Gloves were every bit as essential as a hat if a woman wanted to protect herself from the sun.

Before his death last year, she and Richard had walked every day. She supposed they had looked quite a pair, he with as much skin as possible exposed for a tan, and she covered up to stay attractive for her husband. He had loved this area where they had lived for over 30 years. So, after he died she decided to scold people who might ruin the neighborhood—she wanted it to stay the way Richard had known it.

She walked past the house on the corner of Teel and Pickford. This was the site of one of Angela's special victories. The first year the new people had lived there, they put up an enormous nativity scene in their front yard in December. People only did understated holiday decorating in the development, and this was the first time a nativity display had appeared there. Her note about this had said, "The Christmas season will soon be here again. We hope you won't be erecting that large,

vulgar display on your lawn this year. It is not the type of thing Emerald Grove does." This approach worked, for all those people had outdoors last year was a tasteful wreath. She felt well thanked for her effort when two of her neighbors mentioned that the new family had used better decorating taste this time.

She made a point of going along streets where people would receive messages from her today. There was a youngster she had to report to his parents. Twice she had heard him yell obscenities at other children, and twice she had refrained from doing anything. But last week's use of "motherfucker" had really been too much. He seemed a nice little boy, even saying hello to her sometimes, but she knew he had to be stopped from saying those awful things. She'd want to know if a child of hers talked that way.

There was a family, too, who would receive a suggestion about their new draperies. If they wanted to decorate in red, fine, but they should have linings on those draperies. All that expanse of crimson in the big front window was really too much. She was sure the people were unaware of the bordello effect they were creating; they would be grateful to hear from her.

In the distance she saw the white Jeep of the mail carrier. She knew his route by heart since she was out on the streets so much. If he was on Sylvan Trail, he would have delivered her mail by now. She hurried home.

She gathered her mail from the box and took it inside. She separated the letters from the junk mail and then slit all the envelopes at once. There was one with no return address and unfamiliar handwriting. Inside was a brief message: "I'm sure all that exercise is good for you, but do you know how stupid you look walking around the neighborhood every day with the ugly hat and gloves?" It was signed, "A Neighbor."